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PASSENGERS, REMAIN CALM

HERE IS A SNAKE with a girl in his mouth. She is a little blonde girl, about four years old, and he is a rare albino anaconda, pink and white, about three feet long—just a baby, really. Nevertheless, he is trying to eat the child; her hand and forearm have disappeared down his throat, and he has coiled the rest of his body around her bicep, trying to constrict it. His wide mouth gives the impression of gloating merriment; she, of course, is screaming, and Hollis and his young nephew draw closer to the small circle of bystanders who have formed around her. “It’s all right,” the owner of the Reptile Petting Zoo tells the gathering as he tries to unwind the snake’s coils. “Everything is under control.” The girl is apparently the owner’s daughter. “Just calm down,” he says. “Didn’t Daddy tell you that you should always wash your hands after playing with the gerbils? Now Rosario thinks that you are a gerbil!”

“I hate Rosario!” the little girl wails.

“There, there,” her father soothes. “No, you don’t.” He speaks in a soft voice, but he grunts with exertion as he attempts to untangle his daughter’s arm from the snake, whose tail whips wildly when it is disengaged. “Damn, damn,” the man whispers, sweating.

“My God!” says a woman in the audience. “Kill the thing! Kill it!”

“Please!” the father cries, struggling to maintain his jovial, showman’s voice. “Stand back, everyone! Everything is under control!”

For a moment, Hollis wonders whether his nephew ought to be watching. But then a uniformed security officer arrives, and with the officer’s help, the girl is pried free. There is a smattering of applause. The girl’s hand is red, a bit swollen, but not bleeding. Hollis watches as the owner returns the snake to its glass cage. The owner presses the snake’s snout into a dish of water. “Here,” the man says. “Have a drink.” He holds the snake’s head under

water for a few moments, and though the man's voice sounds placid, even gentle, Hollis can see his jaw tighten with rage.

Hollis has noticed that he always seems to witness these weird little incidents, more than other people.

This is at the town's yearly carnival, which, along with the Reptile Petting Zoo, features the usual menage—a hay ride, a carousel, a Ferris wheel, a few scary rides like the Octopus and the Hammerhead. There are a series of game booths, at which children gamble for stuffed animals and plastic trinkets. At two in the afternoon, there is a pet show; at five, there is a raffle for a brand-new Kawasaki motorcycle; at dusk, there will be fireworks. Hollis's nephew is deeply engrossed, running purposefully from exhibit to exhibit, and Hollis follows thoughtfully, still occupied with the image of the girl and the snake, which he plans to write about in his journal.

Hollis has been spending a lot of time with his nephew lately. Hollis is twenty-two years old, and the boy, F.D., is eight, but Hollis generally finds the child good company. It gives him a chance to do things he wouldn't otherwise, like going to matinees, or ice-cream parlors.

F.D.'s father, Wayne, has been gone for over a month now. Wayne is Hollis's older brother, and though Hollis had known that Wayne was unhappy, he'd never expected him to do something so drastic. No one knew where Wayne had gone—their mother had gotten a postcard, and so had Wayne's wife, Felicia, but Wayne had offered no explanation, only a kind of vague apology. "Everything is okay," he'd written to their mother. "Sorry for any worry, will contact you ASAP. xxxooo Wayne."

Hollis hasn't seen the postcard that Wayne had sent Felicia, but he suspects that she knows more about Wayne's disappearance than she's told anyone. She's been in an odd state since Wayne left—not outraged, not hysterical, not desperate and furious, as Hollis might have expected—but subdued, moody, distracted. Hollis thinks that she might be taking some sort of drug. Her eyes have that floating, somewhere-else look, and on weekends she never seems to get out of her pajamas. Her beautiful dark hair wants cutting, and she has been biting her nails.

But she appears to be functioning: she goes to her job at the supermarket, and F.D. and his little sister Hanna are clean and make it every day to the school bus, but it's clear that things aren't going well. Last Friday night, Hollis went through and collected all the dirty dishes that were lying around, empty cereal bowls in the living room, half-full coffee cups on various surfaces, plates still left on the table from two or three suppers back. He gathered up all the dishes in the sink and washed them.

"You're a nice guy, Hollis," Felicia had said to him, as he stood there at the sink, and he'd shrugged, a little embarrassed. The truth was, he felt a little guilty and ashamed of his brother's behavior. Somebody had to act like a decent person, he'd thought, though he didn't say this. "You *are*," she said. "You're a nice guy." He'd just shook his head.

"Not really," he said, and after a moment she put her hand on the small of his back, low, right above the slope of his buttock. Her hand seemed to tingle, and the air was heavy with the idea that she might kiss him, or he might kiss her. Then, she backed away.

"Hollis," she said. "Let's forget I did that, okay?"

He nodded, and she'd looked into his eyes in a way he found inexplicable. He knew then that there were a lot of things she wasn't telling him, and that Wayne hadn't told him either. "Okay," he'd said, but it wasn't as if he could really forget it, either. That night, he'd written about it in his journal, just a little paragraph. He doesn't write about his feelings or thoughts in the journal. He just describes stuff.

F.D. does not know what is going on. The whole family, including Felicia, seems to be colluding to keep it from the boy. Hollis thinks it is wrong, but he hasn't been given any official say in the matter. The story that F.D. has been given is that Wayne has gone on a long trip and will be back soon. ("Will he be back by my birthday?" F.D. had asked, and everyone agreed, *yes, certainly by F.D.'s birthday*, which is October 31st, and which is now beginning to loom ominously.) It is criminal, Hollis sometimes feels, to play with the boy's mind in such a way. F.D. must know that something is wrong, Hollis thinks.

But if so, he never asks. He seems, as far as Hollis can tell, pretty cheerful, pretty normal.

Still, Hollis thinks of this as they sit on the hay ride, listening to the horses clop heavily along the pathways of the park. They are being driven around the circumference of the carnival. They pass by booths of politicians and county agencies: people running for city council or school board; people that represent the county recycling effort, giving demonstrations on how to create a compost heap; people representing the Department of Human Services, handing out pamphlets that tell of how to avoid abusing your children. The fire department is handing out Rescue stickers for children's windows, florescent circles that will identify their rooms should their house ever catch afire. He recognizes a few of the men, from the brief time he'd worked at the fire department, but he doesn't wave.

But the people on the hay ride do, and the people below wave back, smiling. "Hello! Hello!" the children call. F.D. occupies himself with this for a while, solemnly lifting his hand over his head in a way that makes Hollis sad. F.D. is holding tightly to a small stuffed animal, a furry blue snake with a wide, red felt mouth and google-eyes, about six inches long. F.D. won it by throwing a dart at a corkboard wall lined with a row of balloons. When a balloon had popped, he'd crowed with triumph and done a little dance. "All *right!*" he'd said, pumping his fists as athletic champions did on television.

Now, F.D. dotes over the toy snake thoughtfully, smoothing its polyester fur. "You know," F.D. says. "Someday, I'd like to have a real snake as a pet. That's one of my dreams."

"Yeah," Hollis says. "That would be cool. As long as the snake didn't try to eat you."

F.D. snorts. "That little girl was an idiot," he says with distaste. "I felt more sorry for the snake than I did for her."

"Well," Hollis says. "She was just little."

"I suppose," F.D. says. "But she should have listened to what that man told her, that's all. Most snakes are a friend to Man." He looks solemnly across the hay ride to where sits the woman who had earlier shouted, "Kill the thing! Kill it!" in the Reptile Petting Zoo. She is a plump, round-faced woman with shoulder-length

reddish blonde hair, bobbed in a fashion that is popular among women of her age and social class, and, like F.D., Hollis takes an instinctive dislike to her.

"I see what you mean," Hollis says.

I see what you mean. It was funny, because this was something he would often say when he was talking to Wayne. Wayne was a convincing talker, and Hollis, who was five years younger, would find himself frequently swayed by Wayne's views. It was Wayne who had said, for example, "Never assume that you know what goes on inside a marriage. Because I'm telling you, no matter how close you think you are, you will never know those people like they know each other. It's like a closed system. The weather inside a marriage is always different from the weather of everything around it." Hollis had nodded slowly, considering this. They had been talking about their parents that night, and Hollis had said that he felt certain that neither one of them had ever had an affair. Hollis had said that he couldn't understand why people would do that to their spouses. It didn't make sense, he said, and then Wayne swept in with his metaphors of weather. "I'm not saying that I've had an affair, either," Wayne said. "I'm just saying that you can never assume to know."

"I see what you mean," Hollis said.

He and Wayne had been sitting out in the garage, near the wood stove, in lawn chairs. It was winter, and they were feeding logs into the fire, drinking beers out of a cooler that sat between them. It was their Friday night ritual. Hollis would come over for dinner, and then they would sit in the garage and drink beer, sometimes smoking a little pot, talking. Wayne read a lot, and he always had something interesting to say. Wayne had hoped to be a lawyer, before Felicia became pregnant.

Sometimes, Hollis felt that his brother was his best friend, and he would go to sleep on Wayne and Felicia's couch with a feeling that there was one person on earth who understood him, one person who would always recognize him. Other times, less frequently, he would find himself driving home, his feelings hurt, driving even though he was drunk and afraid of being pulled over, or getting into an accident, and Wayne did not stop him.

Once he'd told Wayne that he thought more weird things

happened to him than to normal people, and he'd described that feeling he had, that the world seemed full of strange little incidents. He had expected Wayne to agree wholeheartedly.

But instead Wayne had looked at him sternly. "It's not the world, Hollis," he'd said, "it's you. I mean, you're an intelligent guy and all, but you're sort of emotionally retarded." Hollis was surprised by the irritation in Wayne's tone of voice. "It's like, do you remember the time Dad had a heart attack? And we were going to the hospital and you looked out the car window and saw a dog with a missing leg? All you wanted to talk about was that stupid dog, and you couldn't believe that the rest of us didn't see it. But we were normal, Hollis. We weren't looking out the window and noticing goofy shit. We were mentally focused on something serious, which you seldom are."

Hollis was stunned, as he always was, though he probably should have been used to it. Sometimes, for no reason, Wayne would attack, treating him like a criminal he was cross-examining during a trial. It didn't make sense. What had he said, to bring this on? He had the sensation of shrinking.

"I didn't know that Dad had a heart attack," he said, after a moment, quietly. "Nobody told me."

"Hollis," Wayne said. He passed his hand, hard, through his bangs, an old gesture which meant, essentially: I can't believe my brother is so stupid. "Hollis," he said. "You never bothered to find out what was wrong. There's a difference."

Now, thinking of this, Hollis gets a hollow feeling in his stomach. He can't believe that Wayne didn't send him a postcard. It makes him feel hoodwinked, betrayed. But by whom? Wayne, or himself? He thinks that he should know why Wayne left, but he doesn't.

F.D. looks like the paternal side of his family. More specifically, he looks a lot like Hollis himself, which Hollis has always found secretly thrilling. In his personality, F.D. is more like Wayne. There is an austere confidence which Hollis recognizes, an expectation that what he has to say is true and important, a certain way his grey eyes cloud with confidence, a way his mouth moves in judgment of other people's ignorance. *Most snakes are a friend to Man.*

Hollis thinks of this as he and F.D. are sitting at a picnic

table, eating nachos. F.D. eats heartily, and Hollis mostly watches. They have recently purchased three raffle tickets, five dollars each, and F.D. is talking about the possibility of winning the motorcycle.

"Well," Hollis says. "I don't usually win stuff."

"But if you did," F.D. says. "What would you do?"

"If I win," Hollis says, "I'll give it to you. When you're sixteen, you can drive it, and until you're old enough I'll give you rides on it. We'll go on a trip on our motorcycle. Like to Washington, D.C., or something. Haven't you always wanted to see the Smithsonian, and the National Monument, and all that?"

"And the White House?" says F.D., enthusiastically. At that moment, F.D. and Hollis love each other unconditionally.

"Yeah," Hollis says. "All of it." He smiles. "And when I'm old, you can take me for rides on it. We'll have to buy helmets."

"Gold ones," F.D. says. "That's the kind I like. Metallic."

"Yeah," Hollis says. And they both drift into separate imaginings.

When Wayne wanted to analyze Hollis, he would say that Hollis was a dreamer, not a doer. "You don't seem to have any plans for your life," Wayne said, in a thoughtful voice that was meant to be constructive criticism. "You just seem to drift from one thing to the next." And Hollis sat there, nodding, as Wayne talked about making up a Five Year Plan, setting some goals.

This was after Hollis quit the job he'd taken on with the fire department, and Wayne was disappointed. Wayne had liked the idea of Hollis's job, and Hollis had, too, at first. But then he'd actually started going to accident sites with the emergency crew, and he changed his mind.

He had thought about telling Wayne this, but then didn't. He didn't want to talk about it.

There was one accident that he remembered. This was about midnight on a Thursday night, and he had been working for a month by then. It was a collision: this kid had rear-ended the back of a stalled semi out on the highway, and the kid's truck had burst into flames on impact. The kid was about 20 or so, he found out later, and must have been going around 70 miles per hour when he crashed. That was it for him, of course. "A boom

and a flash,” said one of the firemen, Larry. “The fat lady sings.” By the time they arrived, there wasn’t much left, and even Larry said it was bad, very bad. He and Larry had tried to get the kid’s corpse out of the truck and onto the stretcher, but the body just fell apart, “like a chicken that got burned up on the barbecue,” Larry said later: cinders, ash, cooked meat. Hollis began to have nightmares, after that, and finally he went to see a therapist that the fire department had hired, whom the firemen could talk to, for free.

“You know,” the therapist said. “You show signs of being susceptible to Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder.” The man had a slow, affectless voice, as if he’d recently smoked marijuana. “If you’d gone to Vietnam, you’d probably have become a schizophrenic. Of course, no one can predict. You may become inured to it, after this. It’s hard to tell.”

Shortly after, he’d resigned. The other men at the fire station had known the reason, and he thought they respected the decision. He hadn’t explained the whole thing to Wayne, which was why Wayne became annoyed. But he didn’t know if he could make Wayne understand. He hadn’t even written about it in his journal.

Beyond the tent where he and F.D. are eating nachos, he can hear the voice of the operator of the Hammerhead, a tinny voice through a microphone, giving the ride a hard sell.

“Passengers, remain calm,” he says ominously, as if he is a pilot announcing an engine failure.

“Hold tight to your loved ones. Prepare yourself. Try not to scream.”

“This guy’s good,” Hollis said to F.D.

“What guy?”

And Hollis waved his hand, pointing to the air so F.D. would know to listen.

“This is what it feels like to be in a plane that is going down,” the operator of the Hammerhead crows. “Do you dare to experience it? Can you take it? Can you take this trip without screaming in horror?”

He grins at F.D., and F.D. grins back: they’re not going on the Hammerhead, they agree in a brief exchange of glances.

Someday, Hollis thinks, he will tell F.D. about the kid's body that fell apart when he tried to lift it. F.D. would understand. "Passengers, remain calm," the man calls in the distance, and Hollis feels for a moment as if he has half-glimpsed a secret, some hidden aspect of the world, something he didn't want to know. He can hear Wayne saying, "It's not the world. It's *you*." He can hear Felicia saying, "You're a nice guy, Hollis." He looks over to where F.D. is sitting, munching tortilla chips. His heart aches.

To a certain extent, he has a life of his own. He now has a job in a factory which makes paper tube products, and it pays pretty well. He has friends his own age, with whom he goes out to bars and such. He has girlfriends, too, though he has noticed that date number three always seems like the end, that things almost always peter out after that.

But the truth is, he had always felt most comfortable with Wayne and Felicia and F.D.—just hanging out, as if he were somehow one of them, as if that was where he really belonged. He has the image of the four of them, sitting in the living room, watching TV. Wayne and Felicia are on the couch, and he is in the recliner, and F.D. is in his pajamas, tucked into a sleeping bag on the floor. They are watching a comedy movie, something he's seen before, but he's enjoying it anyway. He likes to listen to them laugh. He feels safe and welcome: happy. It's awful, because he now feels certain that this moment isn't true.

There is a line at the bathroom, and they wait quietly, shuffling slowly toward a single blue port-o-potty. They are both quiet, and after a time, Hollis smiles down at F.D. "What are you thinking, Buddy?"

F.D. shrugs. "Nothing," he says. He is thoughtful, and he hesitates for a moment. "Uncle Hollis," he says at last. "Have you ever seen the movie *Alien*?"

"I think so," Hollis says. "I don't remember."

"I've been wanting to see it for my whole life," says F.D. "But Mom thinks it's too scary. And I was thinking that maybe we could rent it and watch it at your house sometime. I promise I wouldn't tell Mom. I wouldn't get scared, either."

"Well," Hollis says. "I don't know. That sounds kind of sneaky."

F.D. shrugs. "Not *bad* sneaky," he says. "It wouldn't hurt anybody."

"I don't know," Hollis says. "I'll have to think about it."

"Okay," F.D. says. His eyes rest on Hollis seriously, a long, searching, hopeful look.

After a minute, F.D. says, "I wish I lived with you."

Hollis doesn't say anything. He thinks it would be okay to say, "So do I, Buddy," but he's not sure. It might also be wrong.

They walk along a row of game booths, toward the rides. Out of the corner of his eye, Hollis can see a tent with a sign that says, "Psychic Readings." A lady is sitting there at a card table, with her hands folded, waiting, a woman in her late forties, with a long, solemn face, stoically wearing a shiny turban, as if it is an affront to her dignity. He hopes that she doesn't notice him.

He has always had a dread of fortune tellers and palm readers and such. He has always imagined that they would tell him something he didn't want to know—that something terrible was going to happen, that he was going to die soon, that his life would be full of sadness. Maybe it wouldn't be something bad at all, but the idea of it scared him, nevertheless.

Perhaps the woman can sense this, because she calls out to him as he walks past. "Your future, your fortune!" she shrills, and he smiles, shaking his head briskly: "No thanks!"

"Only five dollars!" the woman says. "I have important information for you!"

F.D. has stopped and is looking from the turbaned woman to Hollis, and back, hopefully.

"No, sorry," Hollis says to the woman. He smiles apologetically. "Sorry!"

She smiles broadly. "Your son thinks you should," she says, and addresses F.D. "Don't you think your father should know his fortune?"

Hollis laughs. "You're no psychic!" he says. "He's not my son!" And then he regrets saying this: the woman looks nonplussed, and F.D. seems to flinch a little. It would have been fun, Hollis thinks, to pretend that he was F.D.'s father. The woman looks at

him stonily, then turns her attention to a group of teenage girls. "Your future!" she calls to them. "I have important information for you!" The girls hesitate, giggling, and Hollis and F.D. move on.

Here is the beautiful carousel. The horses are all brightly colored, posed in forms of agitation. They lift their red mouths as if calling out, their legs curved into gallops, their manes whipping in an imaginary wind. The calliope plays a tune he recognizes but cannot place, something like "A Bicycle Built For Two," but not. The ride was built in the 1890's, according to the sign, and is the oldest carousel still in existence. As they get on, he sees the little girl from the Reptile Petting Zoo, her hand and forearm bandaged, sitting a few horses in front of them. A woman—her mother, probably—stands stoically beside the little girl's horse. He and F.D. are astride their steeds, side by side.

"There's the little girl who almost got eaten by the snake," Hollis says. He gestures with his chin, and F.D. looks over and nods contemplatively.

"The snake couldn't have actually ate her," F.D. explains. "She was way too big." He frowns, then smiles when he realizes that Hollis has been making a joke. "Oh," he says. "I get it." He beams at Hollis for a moment.

"Do you think it would hurt," Hollis says. "To be swallowed?"

"Oh, yeah," F.D. says. "Big time. The snake's muscles contract and it crushes and suffocates you with its coils. Every time you try to breath, it tightens its coils, so finally your lungs can't expand."

"You know a lot about snakes," Hollis says, and F.D. gazes at him seriously.

"I know," F.D. says. He has told Hollis before that he wants to be a scientist when he grows up—a herpetologist, which is a word Hollis hadn't even heard of before, but which means a person who studies reptiles. Looking at F.D. now, Hollis can see the scientist in his face. There is a kind of dignified intensity that Hollis admires. "Uncle Hollis," F.D. says, after a pause. "Can I ask you something?"

"Sure, Kiddo. Anything."

"Is my Dad really coming home?"

Hollis waits a moment. The boy's scrutiny is hard to lie to. "I don't really know, F.D." Hollis says. He hesitates. The carousel has begun to move, and their horses dip and rise in time to the calliope music. What can he say? He waits, feeling the steady, insistent velocity as they move in their circle. He thinks of Wayne—out there, somewhere, driving, sleeping in the passenger seat of his car at some rest stop along the interstate, a Wayne he knows and yet doesn't know. He's never coming back, Hollis thinks.

When they get off the carousel, F.D. is quiet, lost in thought, and Hollis thinks that it might be best to backtrack, to take back the doubt he has planted, to reassure the boy. But he's not sure of the right thing to say. After a moment, he reaches over and brushes his hand over the back of F.D.'s neck.

They sit there for a time, near the carousel, watching people pass, children awash in the urgency of having fun, parents following behind with indulgent, sleepwalking expressions. He knows that they cannot sense the dull panic that has begun to throb around him, beating time to the distant churn of the calliope. But it seems as if it must be visible, like a rash on his skin.

In his journal he would write: "Here is F.D. sitting in the grass. He is quiet, petting his stuffed snake. He won the snake at the carnival, by throwing a dart at the balloon. He looks at the snake as if he is going to talk to it, but he doesn't say a word."

In high school he had a teacher who thought he was a good writer. "You have a good eye," the teacher said, "but you editorialize too much. Let the detail speak for itself." The teacher had given him a story by Hemingway to read, which he hadn't understood, but he thought he understood what the teacher was saying. It made sense.

Once, when he was in 9th grade, and Wayne was a junior in college, he had come into his room and found Wayne reading his journal. Wayne was home from college for Christmas, and Felicia was already pregnant with F.D., though they didn't know it at the time. Wayne would soon drop out, though they didn't know that either. At that moment, they were just brothers, and Hollis stood there in the doorway, horribly embarrassed as Wayne looked up,

smiling that knowing, half-adult smile, holding the journal loosely in his hand.

"Hey," Wayne said. "This is pretty good!"

"Yeah, well," Hollis said, and flushed a bit at the flattery, despite himself. "It's also kind of private."

"Why?" Wayne said. "You don't have anything to be shy about. This is really nice stuff. I'm impressed. I think it would be better if you tied things together more, though."

The thought of impressing Wayne so thrilled him that the sense of invasion and humiliation was quelled, momentarily. But he was cautious, thinking it might only be an elaborate mockery.

Once, when Hollis was ten, Wayne had convinced him that he was adopted. And though Wayne had eventually been forced to recant, Hollis still had doubts. He has doubts, even now.

"It's just for me," Hollis said. "I don't want anyone else to read it. I don't want anyone else to know what I think."

Wayne had smiled. Wayne still thought, then, that he was going to become a famous lawyer, and he hadn't yet envisioned a life with Felicia and F.D., working for the county as a clerk in the courthouse. Wayne couldn't imagine what it would be like to not want others to know what he thought. "Hollis," he said, combing his fingers through his bangs. "That's stupid. Why would you write stuff down if nobody's going to read it?"

"I read it," Hollis said. "That's all. Just me."

And Wayne shook his head. "That doesn't make any sense."

"I see what you mean," Hollis had said. But afterward, he started hiding the thing; he still hides it, at the bottom of his sock drawer, even though he lives alone. Years later, when they were sitting out in the garage, Wayne had asked him if he still wrote in a journal.

"No," Hollis said, though he seldom lied. "I just lost interest."

"Hollis used to be a really good writer," Wayne told Felicia.

"I believe it," Felicia said, and Hollis was sure then that they really loved him. It was one of those moments he would come back to—Wayne and Felicia smiling at him kindly, their love for each other extending and encompassing him. Wayne rested a hand on one of Hollis's knees, and Felicia rested her hand on the other,

and they all leaned close. Now he wonders if this meant anything to them, if they even remembered it.

"F.D..." he says. He has been sitting there silent for a while, thinking, mulling things over, and he knows that F.D. wants him to explain things. "You know, the truth is," he says. "The truth is, I really don't know what's going on with your dad. Nobody has told me anything."

"Where is he?" F.D. says.

Hollis swallows, thinks. "I don't know," he says.

F.D. says nothing, and Hollis feels sorry. He would like to be a real uncle, someone who could explain the world to F.D., someone who could make sense of it.

"He ran away from home, didn't he?" F.D. says.

"Yes," Hollis says.

"I knew that," F.D. says again. He sighs heavily, and Hollis puts his hand on F.D.'s neck, letting it rest there, warm and—he hopes—comforting.

"I'll always be here, though," Hollis says. "I won't leave you." He means it. But he is also nervous. What has he done? He hasn't thought out the consequences clearly, and now a grey uncertainty begins to glide through him. He thinks to say, "Don't tell your mom you know," but he knows that it would be wrong. Then he realizes what he should have said in the first place: *Ask your mother.*

"You should talk to your mom about it," he says. "If you... well, if you don't mention that I told you, that might be best. I mean, maybe she wouldn't have wanted me to be the first one to say something..." He hesitates, because he can't read what's behind F.D.'s heavy expression. "I'm not saying you should lie, or anything. You shouldn't lie to your mom."

"Well," F.D. says, "she lied to me." He looks at Hollis sharply. "She lies all the time."

"No she doesn't," Hollis says, but not insistently. He is trying to imagine how Felicia will react. He is aware now that he has betrayed her, thoughtlessly, that he has treaded into a place where he doesn't belong at all. He has always tried to think carefully about right and wrong, but often the grey areas other people see are invisible to him. He wonders if she will be angry. He imagines her saying, "How dare you tell F.D. such a thing. How dare

you make me look like a liar! What makes you think you know anything about it?" He cringes. And then he thinks, *what if Wayne really does come back?* Then he will have done a truly awful thing. Then he will have damaged Wayne's relationship with F.D. No matter what happens, Hollis thinks, he has permanently altered things between them, and he feels a slow undertow of dread. Everyone is going to be disgusted with him, furious. He can imagine doors closing permanently, his excursions with F.D. ending, becoming unwelcome at Wayne and Felicia's house. He and F.D. look at each other, and he sees that F.D. is quavering on the edge of tears.

"Oh, F.D.," he says. "Don't cry. Please don't cry."

And F.D. doesn't. They get up and begin to walk, and he feels humble and clumsy in the wake of F.D.'s churning thoughts. Terrible, terrible, terrible, he thinks. He wants to slap himself.

"F.D.," he says, after a while. "I think I've made a terrible mistake. I'm thinking that I shouldn't have told you what I told you."

"I know," F.D. says. He is grim, though they are walking through a row of bright booths, through the hawkers' promises of prizes and fun. He shakes his head heavily.

"How do you know?"

F.D. shrugs. "I just do. Mom wouldn't have wanted you to tell me. She'll be mad, won't she?"

"She should be mad," Hollis said. "I did something that was really wrong."

"Oh," F.D. says. He seems to consider this for a moment. "Why were you wrong?"

"Because your mom trusted me not to say anything. And I let her down." He thinks for a moment, trying to explain it clearly. "It's like that little girl and the snake. She'll never trust that snake again. You see?"

"Oh," F.D. says. "Yeah," and Hollis realizes after a moment that the analogy is unclear; it doesn't make a lot of sense. He lapses again into thought, looking ahead to where a group of people are beginning to gather around where the motorcycle sits on a stage. The stage is festooned with scalloped ribbons and Chinese lanterns; tiny disco balls fracture the light into spangles

that glimmer brilliantly on the motorcycle's chrome, and on their faces.

"Uncle Hollis," F.D. says. "Who do you love more? My mom or me?"

"You," Hollis says. He doesn't even have to think. "I love you more than anyone else in the world. That's why I'm sorry that I did a wrong thing. I didn't want to make you sad."

"That's okay," F.D. says. And he reaches up and rubs against Hollis's arm, and Hollis can feel the eagerness of his affection. *I have put him in a terrible position*, Hollis thinks. But he doesn't know what he can do about it.

For the last month, Hollis has been trying to remember the last thing Wayne said to him. It was probably something mundane—"Goodbye," or "So long," or "See you around"—but of course, given that Wayne would disappear a few days later, even these pleasantries are potentially heavy with meaning. But he can't recall. It was an ordinary evening, like any other. He and Wayne had been drinking beer in the garage, and Felicia had stayed in the house, watching TV. She often did this. "You need your 'boy time' together," she'd always said, ironically, though Hollis always liked it best when she sat with them and joined in the conversation.

But in any case, there was nothing to indicate that Wayne was planning to leave. What did they talk about? Movies, mostly, as Hollis remembered. They talked about a recent plane crash, in Scotland, which had been all over the news; the plane might have been downed by a terrorist bomb planted in the luggage. Hollis remembered this only now. The operator of the Hammerhead had brought it back to him, and he recalls Wayne mentioning it. "What do you think goes through your mind when you're going down like that? When you know you're going to die?"

"I don't know," Hollis said. "But you know what I'd be thinking? I'd be thinking, 'This is going to really, really hurt!'"

Wayne had laughed at that, and had told the old joke they both loved in childhood: "Q: What's the last thing that goes through a mosquito's mind when he hits your windshield? A: his butt." And they'd laughed some more, full of beer and dumb camaraderie.

And it strikes him suddenly, a heavy blow. Wayne *knew* he was leaving, even as they sat there laughing and telling stale jokes. But he would have never told Hollis. Hollis can see himself as they see him, even as they are making their secret plans and living their secret lives. He is a distraction to them, an amusement, and he understands Wayne's occasional flashes of anger, too—he can see himself as Wayne saw him, full of earnest, innocent stupidity, chattering vacantly about the “weird things he'd noticed,” not someone that had ever really mattered. His cheeks grow warm, and he wishes that he'd responded to Wayne's question more seriously. *What goes through your mind when you know you're going to die?* He could have finally told Wayne about that kid, that kid whose corpse fell apart when he tried to pick it up. He could have said a lot of things. And maybe then Wayne would have respected him. Maybe Wayne would have told him the truth.

He is so lost in thought that when the man on the stage reads the winner's name, he begins to applaud with the rest of the crowd before he realizes that the man has just read his own name.

“Hollis Merchant!” the man says. “Is Hollis Merchant in the audience today? You are the winner!”

F.D. whoops, “That's us! That's us!” And Hollis is brought back abruptly from his reverie. The crowd has turned to look at him, their eyes wide and expectant. And miraculously, F.D. is healed, is made whole and happy again. He is jumping up and down. “We won!” he cries, his voice shrill with excitement, and he hurls his body against Hollis's in a rough dance of joy. “You and me, Uncle Hollis! Remember? You and me!”

Hollis lifts F.D. onto his shoulders, and the weight of him settles easily into place. Despite everything, he can't help but feel proud and happy, just as F.D. does. The crowd applauds as they walk up to the stage, probably thinking that F.D. is his son, and Hollis is willing to borrow this for the time being. Once F.D. is on his shoulders, he can stride to the stage.

And he has a vision, what he should write in his journal: What if you believed that everything in life was like a prize? What if you thought of the world as a big random drawing, and you were always winning things, the world offering them up with a big grin, like an emcee's:

Here you go, Hollis. Here is a motorcycle. Here is a little boy who loves you. Here is a weird experience, here is something bad that you should mull over, because it will make you a better person. What if you could think that life was this free vacation you'd won, and you won just because you happened to be alive?

He is not deluded. He can see clearly that he is foolish, that his life is made up of a series of muddled interpretations and distractions, that he doesn't know anything about the world he's moving into. But he can also see the two of them on that motorcycle, in those golden helmets that F.D. had dreamed up, going somewhere. "You and me," F.D. whispers, and the roads are clear, there are green fields and wild flowers on either side, and the motorcycle seems to be driving itself. He can even close his eyes for a moment, as the wind and velocity sweep over them. They fly down the highway, calmly, headed off to wherever it will take them.